

South Dakota National Guard

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They say that in the Army the chow is mighty fine

By Pfc. Jennifer Lena
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RAPID CITY, S.D. – Service members spend hours training in conditions that are sometimes unfavorable, such as rain or extreme heat. Sometimes the only thing to look forward to after a long day is a warm meal. Weary troops have been lining up to eat their fill for hundreds of years, and reliably organizing three square meals a day for the masses is no easy task.

Food service specialists shoulder the task of preparing and providing food for the predicted 2,600 service members attending this year's Golden Coyote training exercise held in the Black Hills of South Dakota June 6 – 20. Whether troops are training in the field or eating at a dining facility, there must always be enough food available to sustain them.

In order to seamlessly provide this service, a great deal of coordination and foresight must be exercised behind the scenes.

“One of the biggest challenges during Golden Coyote is knowing how many people are going to need to be fed at each location,” said Chief Warrant Officer 2 Jeffrey Urban, a food services technician for the South Dakota National Guard's Joint Force Headquarters.

In order to get the proper amount of food to the correct places, challenges like organizing civilian truck deliveries, storing rations, and shortages of cooks must be overcome, said Urban.

Many of the events being conducted during Golden Coyote require work in the field, which in turn requires food to be available close to the various operations.

“The cooks will be using a mobile kitchen trailer or a containerized kitchen,” said Urban. “A single MKT has the capability of feeding upwards of 300 people per meal.”

According to the Army Field Feeding and Class I Operations manual, an MKT consists of a complete kitchen unit mounted on a trailer with a vented roof and netting to keep insects out of the area. A refrigeration truck and a sanitary tent used for washing dishes is set up in conjunction with the trailer.

A containerized kitchen has even more capabilities. It has a large self-contained refrigerator, and the capacity to boil, roast, fry, grill and bake. It has more storage space and can feed approximately 600 people per meal.

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This year, each forward operating base will be provided with at least one type of mobile kitchen, said Urban.

Food service specialists begin preparing meals three to four hours before mealtimes depending on how many personnel they are feeding and the type of food being prepared.

On average, food service specialists wake up at 3 a.m. and go to bed close to 11:30 p.m., said Sgt. Ryan Meier, a food service NCO with the Iowa National Guard's 1034th Combat Sustainment Support Battalion.

"Everybody appreciates the cooks, but they just have no idea how much they go through, especially out in the field," said Urban. "They're the first ones up, and the last ones to bed."

To raise morale among food service specialists, a competition is held annually to win the coveted Phillip A. Connelly Award for Excellence in Army Food Service.

"It's a class A meal," said Urban. "Everything they make is from scratch."

Civilian judges score participants based on adherence to regulations, time management skills and cleanliness. Those who score highest advance to the Department of the Army level of inspection and compete again until the winners are determined.

"It's a challenge and it's something new for most of the cooks," said Urban. "It recognizes them for doing the good job everybody already knows they do."

"For me it's a lifestyle more than just a job," said Meier, who holds a civilian culinary degree. "If you're someone who likes to cook, this is a great job."

Food preparation for large numbers of service members has changed in many ways over the years.

"When there were bugs in the dough, we called it raisin bread," recalled Army veteran Allen H. Weller of Eureka, South Dakota. Weller enlisted in the Army in March of 1945 during World War II as a cook and deployed to Okinawa, Japan.

Refrigerated trucks and prepackaged fruit cups were still a thing of the future, so cooks had to prepare the food completely from scratch. There was no room for wastefulness, and there were few sanitary regulations. There was also no such thing as Meals, Ready-to-Eat.

"We had a recipe," said Weller. "We mixed 200 pounds of flour at a time along with probably a gallon bucket of yeast. We would pound it, let it rise, and then cut it into loaves."

Today, stringent regulations detail what temperature rations must be kept at, what the personnel preparing and serving the food must wear and what precautions must be taken to keep the environment around the food sanitary.

On an MKT, modern meals are prepared out of cans or boiled in the packaging. Processed products like cereals and desserts are also commonly served. Food such as salads and other produce are served fresh.

"Fresh meals are hands down the most fun to cook," said Meier. "Anytime we can break the bag open and change it up, that's the best."

South Dakota's Golden Coyote training exercise draws units from all around the United States and the world who look to gain invaluable hands-on training in the fields of combat and combat support. The preparation and distribution of food is an essential part of keeping service members healthy and ready for any mission.

High resolution photos are available at www.flickr.com/southdakotationalguard



150609-Z-ZZ999-789: U.S. Army Spc. Desmond Marsh, of the Illinois National Guard's 1344th Transportation Company, serves breakfast to service members attending the Golden Coyote training exercise, June 9, 2015, at the mobile kitchen trailer located at Ellsworth Air Force Base, S.D. Cooks are expected to feed an estimated 2,600 troops during Golden Coyote as units from all over the country and world gather to conduct military operations, train on their equipment and employ specialized tactics in the Black Hills of South Dakota.. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Pfc. Jennifer Lena/Released)



150609-Z-ZZ999-778: Soldiers attending the Golden Coyote training exercise pick up breakfast, June 9, 2015, at Ellsworth Air Force Base, S.D. Cooks are expected to feed an estimated 2,600 troops during Golden Coyote as units from all over the country and world gather to conduct military operations, train on their equipment and employ specialized tactics in the Black Hills of South Dakota. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Pfc. Jennifer Lena/Released)



150606-Z-ZZ999-336: U.S. Army Spc. Samantha Klecz, of the Illinois National Guard's 405th Brigade Support Battalion, prepares food for service members attending the Golden Coyote training exercise, June 6, 2015, at the dining facility on Camp Rapid in Rapid City, S.D. Cooks are expected to feed an estimated 2,600 troops during Golden Coyote as units from all over the country and world gather to conduct military operations, train on their equipment and employ specialized tactics in the Black Hills of South Dakota. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Pfc. Jennifer Lena/Released)



150606-Z-ZZ999-337: U.S. Army Sgt. 1st Class Michele Brunner, Spc's Samantha Klecz and Spc. Dominique Sanders, of the Illinois National Guard's 405th Brigade Support Battalion, prepare food to serve to troops attending the Golden Coyote training exercise, June 6, 2015, at the dining facility on Camp Rapid in Rapid City, S.D. Cooks are expected to feed an estimated 2,600 troops during Golden Coyote as units from all over the country and world gather to conduct military operations, train on their equipment and employ specialized tactics in the Black Hills of South Dakota. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Pfc. Jennifer Lena/Released)



150606-Z-ZZ999-338: U.S. Army Specialists Samantha Klecz and Dominique Sanders, of the Illinois National Guard's 405th Brigade Support Battalion, prepare trays of food for service members attending the Golden Coyote training exercise, June 6, 2015, at the dining facility on Camp Rapid in Rapid City, S.D. Cooks are expected to feed an estimated 2,600 troops during Golden Coyote as units from all over the country and world gather to conduct military operations, train on their equipment and employ specialized tactics in the Black Hills of South Dakota. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Pfc. Jennifer Lena/Released)

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